

# Robert Garcia

## 1933–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE  
 REPUBLICAN-LIBERAL FROM NEW YORK 1978  
 DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK 1978–1990

A veteran of New York state politics for over a decade, Robert Garcia succeeded Herman Badillo in 1978 to represent a South Bronx district in the U.S. House. Eventually the chairman of two subcommittees, Garcia focused on federal programs to attract businesses to blighted urban areas. Garcia's signal piece of legislation—designating federal “enterprise zones” to promote job growth in depressed inner cities—highlighted a promising House career that ended abruptly when Garcia became enmeshed in the Wedtech scandal through his association with a defense contractor in his district.

Robert Garcia was born January 9, 1933, in Bronx, New York, to immigrants. His Puerto Rican father, Rafael Garcia, worked in a sugar mill before moving to New York City, where he founded an Assembly of God church in an aging storefront.<sup>1</sup> Garcia attended the local public schools, graduating from Haaren High School in 1950, and served overseas in the U.S. Army's Third Infantry from 1950 to 1953 during the Korean War, earning two Bronze Stars.<sup>2</sup> He attended City College of New York, the Community College of New York, and the RCA Institute in 1957, before becoming an engineer at two large computer corporations, where he worked from 1957 to 1965. Garcia married the former Anita Theresa Medina, and the couple raised sons Robert and Kenneth before separating in 1974 and divorcing several years later. In 1980 Garcia married the former Jane Lee, a longtime resident of Puerto Rico who had served as a staffer in the U.S. House in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Garcia first ran for political office in 1965 for the New York state assembly in the 83rd District, which encompassed Puerto Rican neighborhoods in and around Port Morris and Mott Haven in the South Bronx. In the September 14, 1965, Democratic primary he defeated Domingo Ramos, Jr., with 65 percent of the vote.<sup>4</sup> In the general election, Garcia

faced Republican candidate Paul Spitaleri as well as two lesser-known challengers from the Liberal and Conservative Parties. Garcia prevailed handily with 74 percent of the vote in the four-way contest.<sup>5</sup> Since Garcia never had the full support of the regular Democratic organization, he faced a stiff primary challenge in 1966 from A. C. Acevedo, whom he defeated by roughly 70 votes out of the nearly 3,000 cast.<sup>6</sup> Garcia's base of support drew on local labor unions as well as on the Adlai E. Stevenson Independent Reform Democratic Club. In the state assembly, Garcia earned a reputation as an advocate for housing issues, sponsoring a bill, later signed into law, that gave the New York City buildings department the power to subpoena recalcitrant slumlords.<sup>7</sup>

In early 1967, Garcia entered a special election to represent portions of the South Bronx and Harlem in the New York state senate. Like his assembly district, the area was overwhelmingly Democratic. Its large Puerto Rican population (one-third of the district) was matched by equal numbers of African Americans and contingents of Irish and Jewish voters. The seat was left vacant when senator-elect Eugene Rodriguez was convicted and imprisoned for grand larceny, perjury, and conspiracy to murder a drug dealer. Rodriguez never claimed his seat because he was on trial when the legislative session opened. In the March 28, 1967, special election, Garcia—running as a Reform Democrat with the support of the regular Bronx Democratic organization—faced two weak candidates: Republican lawyer Dominick A. Fusco and Conservative Paul M. Patricola, a textile company employee. With little active campaigning, Garcia's name recognition and the endorsement of the Citizen's Union—which called him “a progressive and constructive legislator”—propelled him to an easy victory, with 73 percent of the vote. Garcia became the first Puerto Rican to serve in the state senate.<sup>8</sup>



Serving over a decade in the New York state senate, Garcia built a reputation as a legislative “workhorse,” according to a number of his colleagues. From 1975 to 1978, he served as deputy minority leader in Albany (an elected position). His legislative interests included prison reform, public housing, and narcotics control—all of which appealed to his inner-city constituents.<sup>9</sup> He also struck up a close relationship with U.S. Representative Herman Badillo, who represented a swath of the South Bronx that overlapped his senate and former assembly districts. Like Garcia, Badillo styled himself as a reformer, and he had been Bronx borough president before becoming the first person of Puerto Rican heritage elected to a full voting seat in the U.S. House in 1970.<sup>10</sup>

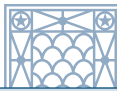
In 1977 Badillo resigned his House seat to become deputy mayor of New York City. The district, which was one of the most poverty-stricken and depressed in the nation, stretched northward from the East River and Mott Haven to Melrose, Morrisania, and West Farms in its northeastern quadrant. It had a reputation for being politically disorganized and had only 75,000 registered voters, a sign of its waning community cohesion. Initially, Garcia was among a field of seven candidates set to compete in the February 14, 1978, special election to fill the remainder of Badillo’s term in the 95th Congress (1977–1979). Having failed to secure the Democratic nomination, Garcia ran as a Republican, making clear his intention to vote with the Democrats in Congress. His principal opponent was Democratic and Conservative nominee Louis Nine, a state assemblyman whose fortune from his liquor and real estate businesses provided him with ample personal resources to wage a campaign. Former city councilman Ramon S. Velez (a longtime rival of Badillo’s who still had great influence in South Bronx antipoverty programs) ran as an Independent. Such party labels, the *New York Times* explained, were “little more than conveniences enabling rejected Democrats to obtain lines on the voting machines.”<sup>11</sup> Badillo campaigned vigorously for Garcia, who also had the support of many leading city politicians, including the New York city council president, the city comptroller, and prominent

African-American politicians such as Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel.<sup>12</sup> On a snowy Election Day with voter turnout higher than expected, Garcia prevailed handily over Nine and Velez, securing 55 percent of the vote versus his opponents’ 25 and 16 percent of the vote, respectively. The *New York Times* called Garcia’s majority “a victory for Badillo” that “reaffirmed” his status as leader of the city’s Puerto Rican community.<sup>13</sup>

Garcia was sworn into the House and resumed his prior affiliation as a Democrat effective February 21, 1978. In a district that experienced intense economic and demographic instability, Garcia never faced serious electoral challenges. In the fall 1978 elections for the full term in the 96th Congress (1979–1981), he was unopposed in the Democratic primary and in the general election. Redistricting after the 1980 Census intended to preserve the Puerto Rican-majority district, adding areas in the Grand Concourse and blocks east of the South Bronx. It did not substantively change the constituency’s strong Democratic tilt. Garcia won his five bids for re-election after 1978 with majorities of 89 percent of the vote or more.<sup>14</sup>

Garcia was assigned seats on the Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee and on the Post Office and Civil Service Committee and remained on both panels for the rest of his House career. He also temporarily served on the Foreign Affairs Committee during the 98th and 99th Congresses (1983–1987). He was quickly awarded the chairmanship of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee’s Census and Population Subcommittee—an important assignment for a Member from one of the nation’s poorest districts—and led that panel from 1979 to 1987. By the 100th Congress (1987–1989), he left to become chairman of the Banking panel’s influential Subcommittee on International Finance, Trade, and Monetary Policy.

In 1979 Garcia gained national attention by sponsoring a bill to establish a national holiday in honor of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. The bill had been pushed by African-American Members for a decade before Garcia took it up, serving as floor manager during debate on December 5, 1979. Opponents decried the millions in wages that would be paid federal workers for a day of



leave. “Some have argued that it would be too expensive to create another Federal holiday,” Garcia told his colleagues. “This is, indeed, a concern. But when weighed against the need to honor all that Dr. King struggled for, prayed for, dreamed about, symbolized, and sought throughout his life, find that the scales of justice tilt decidedly in favor of a new Federal holiday to honor Dr. King.” When opponents in the House passed an amendment requiring that the holiday be observed on a Sunday to avoid a federal holiday during the workweek, Garcia withdrew the bill from consideration, claiming such a designation would put King’s holiday on a par with Leif Erickson Day and National Peanut Day. “We’re not going to go with a commemorative day,” Garcia said. “We’re not going to place Martin Luther King into that situation.”<sup>15</sup> The bill eventually passed the House and Senate and was signed into law by President Ronald W. Reagan in November 1983.<sup>16</sup>

Garcia was attuned to the interests of the larger Hispanic community. From his seat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, he weighed in on U.S.-Latin American policy. Garcia consistently opposed U.S. military aid to the Contras, insurgents who sought to overthrow Nicaragua’s leftist government. Garcia was one of eight members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) who voted in February 1988 to stop arming the Contras; the measure narrowly passed the House, 218 to 211. Caucus opposition to the Reagan administration’s foreign policy in Latin America, notes one scholar, represented a maturation of Latino political power.<sup>17</sup> From 1981 to 1984, during the 97th and 98th Congresses, Garcia served as chairman of the CHC. He was the CHC’s second chairman as well as its longest-serving chairman; he served for two terms, partly because of his fundraising innovations.<sup>18</sup>

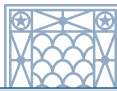
Garcia’s principal focus was steering federal dollars, projects, and jobs into his economically distressed South Bronx district. Shortly after he took office, a major political publication described the district as “a sort of national slum.” “Its many acres of abandoned and vandalized buildings in the South Bronx have become the symbol of contemporary urban decay,” noted a companion publication.<sup>19</sup> Unemployment was rampant, and crime

was exceedingly high. Additionally, a transition from older Jewish and Italian immigrants to younger Puerto Ricans and African Americans fueled a decline in the district’s population, which according to one estimate decreased by half between 1972 and 1980.<sup>20</sup> As a junior House Member, Garcia described his district for political columnist David Broder. “There are parts ... that are absolutely devastated, as bad as anything in Berlin in 1945.” But “you talk to the people of the South Bronx and you’re going to find many people who—in spite of the adversity, in spite of the tremendous odds, in spite of everything—have been able to raise families and bring forth young people who are making a contribution.”

Garcia’s legislative strategy was to leverage the influence of his seat on the Banking Committee to attract capital and industry to his district. He told Broder, “All I need are one or two successful projects. I think from that point on we can take off on our own. I think we’d get enough private money in so we wouldn’t have to worry about the government’s help.”<sup>21</sup> This philosophy of limited government intervention to spark entrepreneurship had bipartisan appeal because it did not require another round of massive federal expenditures to solve the problem of poverty in the South Bronx.

In 1980 Garcia teamed with Republican Jack Kemp of Buffalo, New York, to co-author the Urban Jobs and Enterprise Zone Act. Introducing the bill on the House Floor on June 12, 1980, Garcia explained that it aimed to ameliorate “the plight of the cities ... largely due to economic abandonment by businesses.” The bill, Garcia said, sought “to begin the economic redevelopment of the slums by creating new reasons for entrepreneurs to want to set up businesses in them.”<sup>22</sup> The Garcia–Kemp measure called for the creation of urban “free enterprise zones” where businesses would receive tax breaks for locating in economically depressed inner cities, such as the Bronx, and for hiring local residents. Payroll and capital gains taxes would be reduced to stimulate hiring. Additionally, the bill would establish duty-free foreign-trade zones for imports and exports fabricated in enterprise zones. Though Kemp and Garcia differed on many issues, both men, according to Garcia,





agreed on the need for the “reestablishment of opportunity producing incentives in areas where they no longer exist but once did—and that it is proper for government to provide incentives to attract businesses to areas which face severe depression, unemployment, and poverty.”<sup>23</sup> Garcia argued that such a program would benefit federal and local tax bases. “Our slums now produce little revenue either for their residents—that is, wages—or for their governments—that is, taxes,” he explained. “I believe that it makes a great deal of sense to supplement existing programs with tax cuts to the poor and to those in impoverished neighborhoods who wish to become small business persons ... to become active producers of revenue.”<sup>24</sup>

For several Congresses the House refused to pass the tax breaks that were necessary to implement the enterprise zone project. Part of the problem in the Democratically controlled House was that conservative Republicans, including President Reagan, embraced the plan. Liberals believed this was cover for efforts to redline funding for longstanding urban renewal programs. Moreover, Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski of Illinois, the gatekeeper for tax-related bills, opposed the plan. But many states adopted legislation that mirrored the proposed federal enterprise zone bill. Garcia persevered on the project until 1988, when a portion of his plan for inner-city economic development was enacted as part of a larger housing bill. While that bill authorized the creation of 100 enterprise zones—to be designated by the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development—it failed to provide tax incentives for businesses. In the 101st Congress (1989–1991), with Kemp ensconced as President George H. W. Bush’s Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Garcia, aided by Ways and Means Committee member and fellow New York Representative Rangel, launched a new effort to provide tax breaks to attract businesses.<sup>25</sup>

Garcia’s promising House career unraveled in 1988 and 1989 when he was implicated in the Wedtech scandal. A small, Hispanic-owned defense contracting firm in Garcia’s district that had received multimillion-dollar contracts, Wedtech was investigated by the U.S. Justice Department after it missed deadlines to produce military engines.

Federal officials uncovered a massive bribery and extortion scheme that ensnared executive and legislative branch officials.<sup>26</sup> That year Garcia faced his first substantive primary challenge as an incumbent; two relatively obscure competitors won a combined 40 percent of the vote.<sup>27</sup> In November 1988, Garcia and his wife, Jane, were charged by investigators with accepting more than \$80,000 from Wedtech as well as numerous loans and gifts. On October 20, 1989, the Garcias were convicted on extortion and conspiracy charges; they were acquitted of four counts of bribery and illegal gratuities. On January 7, 1990, before his sentencing and after the House Ethics Committee had launched an inquiry into the case, Representative Garcia resigned his seat. The Garcias were sentenced two weeks later to three years in prison, but the conviction was overturned on appeal. Garcia was tried a second time and convicted again in 1991, but that conviction too was overturned, and he spent no time in jail.<sup>28</sup>

## FOR FURTHER READING

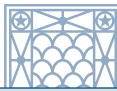
*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Robert Garcia,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

**Special Collections and University Libraries, Rutgers University Libraries** (New Brunswick, NJ). *Papers*: New Democratic Coalition of New York Records, 1960–1978, 49 cubic feet. Persons represented include Robert Garcia.

## NOTES

- 1 For more on Garcia’s youth and family background, see David Broder, *Changing of the Guard: Power and Leadership in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981): 291–292; Marilyn W. Thompson, *Feeding the Beast: How Wedtech Became the Most Corrupt Little Company in America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1990): 178–188; Glenn Fowler, “New Representative from Bronx: Robert Garcia,” 22 February 1978, *New York Times*: NJ24. No published source lists the name of Garcia’s mother.
- 2 *Politics in America, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1989): 1047; Carmen E. Enciso and Tracy North, *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–1995* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1995): 51.



- 3 Josh Barbanell, "A Streetwise Son of the Bronx Undergoes a Transformation on Capitol Hill," 22 November 1988, *New York Times*: A1; Nadine Brozan, "Verdict Dashes a Classic Success Story," 21 October 1989, *New York Times*: 28. The Garcias' marriage date is from James Traub, *Too Good to Be True: The Outlandish Story of Wedtech* (New York: Doubleday, 1990): 183.
- 4 "Prospective Primary Contests in City," 11 August 1965, *New York Times*: 23; Primary Voting Results, 16 September 1965, *New York Times*: 50.
- 5 List of Candidates, 1 November 1965, *New York Times*: 44; "Tally of Voting in Suburban and New Jersey Contests; State Assembly Results in City," 3 November 1965, *New York Times*: 33.
- 6 "Garcia Wins Unofficial Tally," 1 July 1966, *New York Times*: 14.
- 7 James F. Clarity, "Democrat Garcia Favored in Bronx: Special Election Today Will Fill Rodriguez's Seat," 28 March 1967, *New York Times*: 25; James F. Clarity, "Garcia Wins Seat Held by Rodriguez," 29 March 1967, *New York Times*: 33.
- 8 Clarity, "Garcia Wins Seat Held by Rodriguez"; Clarity, "Democrat Garcia Favored in Bronx: Special Election Today Will Fill Rodriguez's Seat." Rodriguez, too, was of Puerto Rican heritage, but never served in the New York state senate.
- 9 "Robert Garcia, The Winner in Bronx Race," 15 February 1978, *New York Times*: A22; Glenn Fowler, "Two Front-Runners Are Emerging in Race for Badillo's House Seat," 30 November 1977, *New York Times*: 32.
- 10 Puerto Rico had been represented by nonvoting Resident Commissioners in the U.S. House since the early 20th century.
- 11 "Black Vote Pivotal in South Bronx Race: Four Puerto Rican Candidates for Badillo's Congressional Seat Woo Other Minority Group," 5 February 1978, *New York Times*: 21.
- 12 Glen Fowler, "Garcia and Velez Rated in the Lead of Large Field Seeking Badillo Seat," 10 January 1978, *New York Times*: 37; "Black Vote Pivotal in South Bronx Race: Four Puerto Rican Candidates for Badillo's Congressional Seat Woo Other Minority Group."
- 13 Frank Lynn, "Mrs. Abzug Defeated Narrowly by Green; Garcia Wins in Bronx," 15 February 1978, *New York Times*: A1. See also Glenn Fowler, "Garcia's Victory Gives Added Leverage to Badillo," 16 February 1978, *New York Times*: B10.
- 14 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>; *Almanac of American Politics*, 1984: 828.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (5 December 1979): quotation on p. 34749; for the full debate, see pp. 34747–34765. Mary Russell, "King Holiday Frustrated," 6 December 1979, *Washington Post*: A6; see also "Ducking a King Holiday Vote," 7 December 1979, *Washington Post*: A16.
- 16 Office of History and Preservation, U.S. House of Representatives, *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2008): 385.
- 17 Antonio González, "Chicano Politics and U.S. Policy in Central America, 1979–1990," in *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, David Montejano, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999): 154–172.
- 18 Barbanell, "A Streetwise Son of the Bronx Undergoes a Transformation on Capitol Hill."
- 19 *Almanac of American Politics*, 1980: 614; *Politics in America*, 1982: 847.
- 20 Cited in *Politics in America*, 1982: 847.
- 21 Broder, *Changing of the Guard*: 292.
- 22 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (12 June 1980): 14468–14469.
- 23 *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (2 October 1980): 29031–29033; quotation on p. 29033. See also Hon. Robert Garcia, "Toward a New Federal Role in Urban Redevelopment—A Policy of Opportunity Development," *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (19 August 1980): 22059–22061.
- 24 Hon. Robert Garcia, "Setting the Record Straight on the Kemp–Garcia Enterprise Zones Bill," *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, House, 96th Cong., 2nd sess. (2 July 1980): 18682–18683.
- 25 See *Politics in America*, 1990: 1048.
- 26 Representative Mario Biaggi, who represented a Bronx district next to Garcia's, was convicted of bribery in August 1988. For contemporary news coverage, see Arnold H. Lubasch, "U.S. Indicts Rep. Garcia, His Wife, and a Lawyer in Wedtech Inquiry," 22 November 1988, *New York Times*: A1. Two major book-length accounts describe the rise and fall of Wedtech and its associates: Traub, *Too Good to Be True: The Outlandish Story of Wedtech*, especially pp. 183–185 and 270–273; and Thompson, *Feeding the Beast: How Wedtech Became the Most Corrupt Little Company in America*: 178–188.
- 27 *Politics in America*, 1990: 1049.
- 28 For more information, see "Historical Summary of Conduct Cases in the House of Representatives," Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, 9 November 2004, <http://ethics.house.gov/Pubs/Default.aspx?Section=15> (accessed 6 May 2010); Mark Grossman, *Political Corruption in America: An Encyclopedia of Scandals, Power, and Greed*, vol. 1, (New York: Grey House Publishing, 2008): 185–186; William Glaberson, "Garcias' Extortion Convictions Are Reversed by Appeals Panel," 30 June 1990, *New York Times*: 1; Ronald Sullivan, "Convictions of Garcias in Wedtech Scandal Overturned Again," 23 April 1993, *New York Times*: B3; and "U.S. Will Not Retry Garcia in Extortion," 16 September 1993, *New York Times*: B3.